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N. Tait McPhedran

Canadian medical schools: two centuries of medical history, 1822 to 1992, Montreal, Harvest House, 1993. Pp xii + 245, bibliographic references, index. ISBN 0-88772-252-0.

In this lively and highly readable book, Tait McPhedran chronicles the growth of Canada's sixteen medical schools. Each chapter documents the development of a single institution, tracing an often convoluted history influenced by political and religious conflicts, economic circumstances, and colorful personalities. An interpretive introduction maps out the general trends in Canadian medical education since the early nineteenth century. The conclusion offers the author's personal observations on the present state of medical teaching and his suggestions for improvement.

McPhedran successfully deals with many facets of Canadian medical education from politics and funding to pedagogy and bureaucracy. He charts out a story of progress and accomplishment but also displays his familiarity with the difficulties faced by medical schools in recent years such as increasing health care costs, the conflict between teaching and research aims, and the sometimes stormy relationship of schools to hospitals. He is especially good at detailing the different and pioneering approaches Canadian schools have taken in designing their curricula. He demonstrates the influence of the Western Reserve curriculum on many institutions, especially those established in recent decades. The most notable example is the McMaster curriculum, a multidisciplinary programme organized around body systems, and emphasizing problem solving in tutorial settings. While McPhedran advocates problem-based learning and was himself a long-time member of the Faculty of Medicine at Calgary where an innovative three year curriculum is in place, he takes a balanced approach to this issue.

He argues that both the system-based programme and the traditional programme, consisting of two years of basic science courses followed by two years of clinical courses, have been shown to produce competent physicians. He asks, "Who is to judge which system is better?"

McPhedran assigns a pivotal role to the Flexner Report of 1910 which he calls the blueprint for medical education in Canada. The harsh criticisms made by Abraham Flexner and backed by the American Medical Association spurred Canada's weaker schools to meet the standards set by the model of Johns Hopkins. While the author is careful to note that the Flexner Report served only as a catalyst to change, he gives the Report a central and dramatic place in his narrative. His treatment contrasts with recent American historiography in which the importance of the Flexner Report has been played down in favor of a multi-causal account of educational reform in the United States. McPhedran also mentions that unlike the many American proprietary schools that were closed in the wake of Flexner's visit, all the Canadian schools that were surveyed survived to receive a Grade A status within twenty years. Regrettably, the author does not tackle the larger question of whether the impact of the Flexner Report was different in Canada than in the United States, and why this might have been so.

The author has taken on a large subject and understandably, may have been unable to consider its human dimension at much length. While the accomplishments of the more renowned faculty members are described, the reader gains little sense of what daily life would have been like for ordinary teachers and students. Nevertheless, the author successfully draws together political, religious, economic, professional and personal influences to create a solid institutional history. He very diplomatically finds something positive to say about every school. Those institutions that are not cited for their teaching or research accomplishments are credited with struggling through tough economic times or with successfully serving a local community.

This book admirably brings together the stories of Canadian medical schools from material that has previously been scattered among many articles and book-length histories of single institutions. It is based primarily on interviews that the author conducted with ten to twenty members of each faculty. The story is rounded out with an examination of primary documents. The author, or perhaps the publisher, has opted to place bibliographic references to each chapter at the end of the book. While this format nicely

affords the general audience a seamless narrative, the absence of footnotes limits the value of the book to scholars. Some intriguing comments are left unattributed. Still, this book is a welcome contribution to Canadian medical history, offering a coherent and systematic account delivered with style and the authority of personal experience.

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